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AGO ltr 29 Apr 1980

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IN REPLY REFER TO

AGAM-P (M) (28 Dec 67) FOR OT RD 67X136

8 January 1968

SUBJECT: Special Operational Report - Lessons Learned, Casualties
from Own Fires

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2. Information contained in this report is provided to insure appropriate benefits in the future from Lessons Learned during current operations, and may be adapted for use in developing training material.

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Kenneth G. Wickham

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The Adjutant General

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SPECIAL OPERATIONAL REPORT - LESSONS LEARNED

Prepared at Headquarters, Department of the Army

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1. Recently, a US artillery battery was firing an H & I mission with a computed charge 4. A breakdown in doublecheck and readback procedure caused rounds to be fired at charge 7. This caused the rounds to impact within a US base camp killing one soldier and wounding 37. Assuming the incoming rounds to be from a hostile attack, the base camp commander ordered an alert. Following an approved SOP, "X" Division FSCC ordered mortar and artillery units under its OPCON to fire on previously cleared countermortar targets. During this time, two suspected enemy launching sites were reported and an air observer was ordered to check them out. This observer reported flashes from an area near the end of an adjacent airfield runway. Clearance to fire on-call targets located in the area of the flashes was requested of and granted by the commander of an adjacent division in whose area the targets were located. Firing on cleared targets continued.

2. A countermortar radar (CMR) operator within the base camp detected mortar fire originating outside the base camp and reported incoming rounds. In fact, the mortar rounds were impacting outside the base camp. Simultaneously, an observer in a tower on the perimeter of the base camp reported 6-8 flashes on an azimuth coinciding with the location detected by CMR. Unknown to "X" Division FSCC, a mortar unit in the adjacent division area was firing on targets cleared by its FSCC from within the area reported by radar and the perimeter tower.

3. A request to fire countermortar fires against the reported mortars was properly denied by the adjacent division. However, because CMR repeatedly reported incoming mortar rounds "X" Division FSCC notified the adjacent division that if the suspected enemy mortars continued to fire, counterfire would be authorized. Subsequently, the radar reported more incoming rounds and firing batteries were directed to lay on the suspected mortar target. Artillery batteries challenged the mission since the target was in a no fire zone.

4. Two minutes later, the "X" Division artillery commander made the decision to fire and a total of 34 rounds were fired. The rounds impacted in and around a friendly installation killing 12 and wounding 40 persons. Fortunately, because a C-47 gunship had arrived on station, all firing was suspended. From beginning to end the tragic series of events lasted only 23 minutes.

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5. An initial SHELREP of the rounds which landed in the US base camp indicated a back azimuth of the direction of a US artillery unit. This was confirmed by additional SHELREPS. Later a 105mm rotating band, and fragments and fuzes with US markings, were found near the craters. A later report, revealing the firing of the erroneous charge by a US artillery battery, confirmed the rounds were from a US artillery unit.

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6. In summary, a US battery fired an erroneous charge. The rounds landed on a US base camp which went on alert. Units within and without the camp began firing countermortar fires on prearranged targets. The location of one friendly firing unit, outside the camp, was unknown to the "X" Division FSCC. Erroneously, the unit firing from outside the camp was reported as firing into the camp. Counterfire was placed in the vicinity of the unknown unit, causing more casualties.

7. The original error was a breakdown in the doublecheck procedure of transmission and readback of commands from the FDC to the XO. Further compounding the error was the fact that the rules of engagement of headquarters concerned were not consistent. "X" Division artillery was operating under an OPLAN which provided that "once a mortar or rocket attack commences, targets of opportunity will be engaged immediately by the FSCC without waiting clearance." Thus, the "X" Division Artillery CO made the decision to fire on the suspected location without the adjacent division's clearance to fire. The adjacent division had failed to report the location of all its firing units.

8. The lessons which may be learned from this incident fall in the category of lessons relearned, which makes the incident all the more tragic.

a. Doublecheck and readback procedures must be continually stressed if supported troops are to retain faith in their fire support.

b. Rules of engagement must be specific, rigidly enforced, consistent, and the permission to deviate from them must be held at high levels.

c. In a counterinsurgency environment the locations of all friendly firing units must be known to the FSCC and to target acquisition agencies. Failure in this regard can cause units to accuse each other of firing into friendly installations, with tragic consequences.

9. Commanders of agencies and of organizations responsible for training are enjoined to make use of the lessons cited above, as well as any other lessons which will prevent friendly casualties from friendly fire.

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